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Educationist Yunus Raiss dies at 84

<https://www.kirkbyites.net/articles/yunus5456poem.pdf>



Datuk Yunus Raiss



By **Zaharah Othman**

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EDUCATIONIST Datuk Yunus Raiss, 84, died on Sunday at University College Hospital here.

Spending the last few weeks at his hospital bedside, I have learnt a lot more about the man who rose from being an illiterate 15-year-old from Batu Gajah, Perak, to a magistrate, principal and proprietor of Sels College, than I ever did in a friendship of almost 40 years.

He was often described as “kind and generous” by those who knew and loved him as friend, mentor, father and grandfather.

Always by his bedside, since he was admitted, were several Malaysian students — Ain, Nur Hayati as well as Dr Amalina Amir, who were among those he had taught English at Malaysia Hall every Friday evening.

They took turns to take care of him with Yunus’ old friend, Ravi Pillai, who would stay there from morning until noon.

The man, whose love for teaching knew no bounds, taught for free. The Malaysian students were not the only recipients of his generosity.

When Amalina was nominated for the Schmidt Science Fellowship, she discovered Yunus slotted her in with students from Egypt, Syria and Italy.

Several years ago, a Malaysian who was in London for a short course had the misfortune of being mugged. Yunus paid for his two-week stay at the Malaysia Hall plus food at the canteen.

He always encouraged me to do more and even paid for my trip to Berlin to film an old manuscript for a documentary. He contributed a generous sum to a child who came here for a liver transplant.

Being with Yunus, even outside the classroom, was always a learning experience. I remember meeting him on a bus to Cricklewood, north London.

His observation was sharp — he brought to my attention the different languages being spoken by the passengers, which he said was like driving through different countries.

Yunus lived by the motto, “Learning to learn to live to learn”. He was learning several languages.

Last week, among the stream of visitors to his bedside was his Mandarin teacher. She had taught him for two years and was saddened by his sudden absence in May.

She cried when her greeting, “*Ni hao ma*”, was replied with a weak “*Hao*”. I took the cue and said, “*Datuk, wa ai ni*”, to which he smiled and replied, “*Wa ai ni*”.

He spoke Tamil to his relatives who visited from afar, and impressed fellow patients and hospital staff with his English.

When he woke up from his painkiller-induced sleep, we spoke about theatres and restaurants — two of his favourite subjects.

Once, Leo Hamburger, who has known Yunus since he was a toddler, mentioned several favourite plays of Yunus and the latter responded by saying “Covent Garden!” — a place he held dear perhaps because this was where his school for English was located.

When we mentioned food, he demanded that the phone be given to him.

“Who are you calling at 1am, Yunus?” Leo wanted to know.

“The Punjab — take away,” he said, jabbing at the screen.

It was sad that in the last few years of his life, he was denied several of his favourite foods, having been put on a strict diet.

He loved the Malaysia Hall canteen. His fear of flying meant he had not flown back to Malaysia for the past 20 years, so he religiously went to the Malaysia Hall canteen to get his fix of *mee rebus* and roti canai.

“Malaysia Hall is home to me. Without Malaysia Hall, where would I go?” he said.

Once, when the nurse told him off for eating melon as his sugar level was high, he looked despondent for a while. Then, he looked up and said, “Roti canai!”

I promised him that I would bring some the next day, but he insisted I do so immediately. Thankfully, he fell asleep and I brought his favourite food the next day.

Yunus believed in giving people a chance. When he couldn’t read or write, the tailor who was his first employer at the age of 15 gave him that chance he needed and sent him to evening classes.

He was among Malayan teachers who went to Kirkby to be trained in 1954. Train tickets were already booked for him for a reunion of Kirkby-trained teachers at the end of the month. They were supposed to meet at where they were taught. He was supposed to read his poem, *Kirkby — A Many Splendoured Thing*, there.

Yunus will be remembered by all who knew him as the “Malay English gentleman” — always meticulously attired, with a hat, coat, muffler and a handkerchief, tucked in his pocket.

“I have never seen him in anything but suits,” said his son, Alex Swan, who was by his bedside almost every day since learning about his deteriorating health.

The presence of Alex and his wife, Sherry, during the last few weeks of his life meant so much to Yunus.

Yunus may have left us, but he will live on in our memories. We will miss him dearly.

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